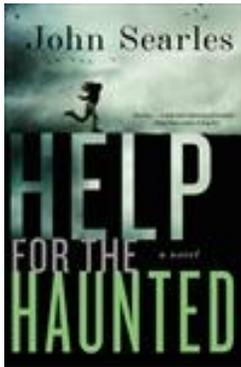


Help For The Haunted



By John Searles

Hardcover: 368 pages

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About the book

It begins with a call one snowy February night. Lying in her bed, young Sylvie Mason overhears her parents on the phone across the hall. This is not the first late-night call they have received, since her mother and father have an uncommon occupation: helping "haunted souls" find peace. And yet something in Sylvie senses that this call is different from the others, especially when they are lured to the old church on the outskirts of town. Once there, her parents disappear, one after the other, behind the church's red door, leaving Sylvie alone in the car. Not long after, she drifts off to sleep, only to wake to the sound of gunfire.

As the story weaves back and forth through the years leading up to that night and the months following, the ever-inquisitive Sylvie searches for answers and uncovers secrets that have haunted her family for years.

Capturing the vivid eeriness of Stephen King's works and the quirky tenderness of John Irving's novels, *Help for the Haunted* is told in the captivating voice of a young heroine who is determined to discover the truth about what happened on that winter night.

Questions for Discussion

1. After her parents' death, Sylvie learns from Father Coffey that her family was driven out of the church by rumors and gossip. But the Masons were very devout. How does the tension between their faith and their unusual activities play out? In what ways do the intersections of these two forces make sense?
2. When speaking in Ocala, Sylvester says he investigates "the otherness" of the world we live in. What, exactly, do you think this means? Are demons and spirits the only manifestations of "otherness" we encounter in the novel? Are there any kinds of "otherness" that the Masons are not interested in confronting?
3. When Sylvester drags Rose out of their hotel in Ocala – once she has returned from her evening with Uncle Howie – what do you think he says to her?

4. In the theater, Howie recounts for Sylvie how he admitted to Sylvester the truth about the "globules." Why do you think Sylvester reacted the way he did, with silence? How do you explain the other encounters he had that weren't Howie's tricks? Why were the ghosts so important to him?
5. Why are the horses Howie gave her so significant to Sylvie? What do you think they represent, and why is she so upset when they break?
6. Of the Entwistles, Sylvie's mother says, "What they were doing, I believe, was sharing with us a kind of truth they had created for themselves... There are times when it is easier to fool yourself than swallow some jagged piece of reality." What are some other examples in the book of characters fooling themselves?
7. With her father gone, there are many different men that Sylvie turns to for guidance: Sam Heekin, Detective Rummel, Derreck, Arnold Boshoff, Father Coffeey, Lloyd, and Uncle Howie. What role do they each play in her life?
8. Sylvie's mom and her dad have very different reactions when Abigail begins to take Rose's place in their household. Why is this? And what does Abigail represent for each of them?
9. Derreck says to Sylvie, "It's not the end of the world if you don't always know all the answers." We eventually learn who killed the Masons but, at the end of the book, what questions are we still left with? What are some answers that Sylvie is still looking for?

Mystery Man: John Searles

By Ruby Cutolo | Publishers Weekly, Jun 21, 2013



First impression of John Searles, bestselling author of the novels *Boy Still Missing* and *Strange but True*, and the forthcoming *Help for the Haunted* (Morrow, September): sincere, genuine, delightful, funny, humble, lighthearted, positive. There is no tortured writer here, though some may believe otherwise, given the dark nature of his writing.

Searles admits as much. "People are often surprised that I am so upbeat," he says. "I'm always hearing, 'You're so light and funny, and your books are so dark and twisted.' There's a dichotomy. I like books that are dark and creepy. I don't control it—it's just what I gravitate toward."

He attributes his strong sense of "seizing the day" to a childhood he describes as "extremely 'colorful.'" Searles grew up in Connecticut (not the Connecticut where people play croquet and sip mint juleps, he jokes), one of four children. His father was a truck driver and his mother didn't work outside the home. Driving, he says, is in his blood, and he can make amazing three-point turns. When he was nine, his parents decided to send him trucking with his father over summer vacation to "make a man out of me," he explains, adding, "I don't think they got the result they wanted." It was on these trips that Searles began reading a lot. He liked the idea of being on the open road with his father, but ultimately the

driving involved hours of “staring at a yellow line,” so he bought mass market paperbacks at truck stops. Aside from being a big reader, Searles says he always wanted to write; he shows me a homemade book written and illustrated by a very young Searles, and decorated with wallpaper. He made these books and would then “sell” them to his family. Although there were struggles, Searles is quick to emphasize the happy aspects of his early life: “I did have a great, warm family, but we had some bad things happen.” His parents married when his mother was 16 and his father was 17, but divorced after Searles’s younger sister died tragically, just before her high school graduation.

While Searles knew he wanted to be a writer, he didn’t think it was possible. He didn’t know anyone who wrote. “No one in my family had ever even gone to college,” he says. School was extremely difficult: “I was really bullied because of being gay. I wasn’t out, but I was different; it was a very small town, I wasn’t good at sports, and I was teased, badly.” Searles escaped to the library, where, among other things, he taught himself how to read tarot cards. College was what Searles wanted, but he hadn’t gotten good grades in high school and money was an issue. His parents got him a job at the DuPont factory in Newtown, Conn. “I gave it my best,” Searles says. “I joined the bowling team... my job was to collect orders for parts, and I counted everything wrong.” His coworkers encouraged him to go back to school, and after eight months of working in the factory and saving money, Searles quit and got a job at night as a telemarketer and a weekend job as a stock boy. His story makes one truly believe that anything is possible if you put your mind to it—and work very, very hard.

Searles attended a state school in Connecticut, lived in his parents’ garage, and majored in business because he thought it was practical. “Then my sister died, and that changed everything, because it was horrific,” Searles says. He took an extra year to finish college, switching his focus to writing. “My sister made me realize that life is short, and I thought, you know, this is what I always wanted to do.” Searles applied to N.Y.U.’s writing program and got in with a scholarship (he had won several writing awards at his state school). His father had a job shipping sets for Broadway shows so he “literally put my garbage bags in his truck and went with him to New York City—it was around 1993.” Searles moved to Greenwich Village and began attending N.Y.U.; while there, he met Ann Hood, who took him under her wing and “really made a difference in my life,” he says. Back in Connecticut, Searles’s parents divorced. He went home every weekend to see his 13-year old sister, waiting tables at night and then taking the train back to New York.

While at N.Y.U., Searles wrote a novel, sent it out, and promptly received a rejection letter. “I was so dramatic, I took to my bed,” he says. Then a first line came to him: “Whenever my father would disappear we’d look for him on Hanover Street.” That was the beginning of his first published book, the thriller *Boy Still Missing* (Morrow, 2001), about abduction, betrayal, adoption, and alcoholism—to name a few of its themes. Searles wrote the novel while waiting tables and working as a nanny. “It’s such a mix of influences, my writing. On trips with my dad I read a lot of Stephen King, John Irving, Sydney Sheldon, and my dad’s trucker erotica.”

Searles got a job out of N.Y.U. reading fiction submissions at Redbook part-time before moving to Cosmo. He went to the Cosmo interview wearing a jacket from the Salvation Army. “I think they hired me because they felt sorry for me. It was like Alice in Wonderland: suddenly I was dropped into this world unlike anything I had experienced; it was fascinating.” He kept getting promoted, working and writing at the same time. “I got my training early on, writing while working at so many other jobs, it never occurred to me to do it any other way.” *Boy Still Missing* took him four years to complete. Searles had a two-book contract, and for the second book, *Strange but True* (Morrow, 2004), he wrote frantically, using 23 pads of paper, scribbling on the subway and in the bathtub.

Searles always has several projects going at once, and that's how he likes it. "My personality has two sides: a very social side and a reclusive side. I love writing fiction, although I can't imagine ever being locked up in a room writing all the time." There was a nine-year gap between *Strange but True* and *Help for the Haunted*, which he calls his darkest story yet. The new book is told from a female perspective. "All my friends are female, I've edited for a magazine for young girls for 15 years, I relate to women, and I'm very, very close to my younger sister," Searles says. "It all makes sense." *Help* is a bold, suspenseful, all-consuming ghost story about a young girl haunted by the murder of her parents. The inspiration came from several different jumping-off points. One was a couple from his hometown, known demonologists, whom he saw at an event. Another was his time at Yaddo, a writer's colony in upstate New York, where he stayed in an old gothic Tudor house in the woods. Searles says, "A lot of what I write does come from my sister dying and my kooky town and upbringing. This book is part family story, part mystery."

Searles is close to his family and says they're supportive. "The idea that I would arrive [in New York] in my dad's tractor trailer, and now I own a home, have a great job, write books—it's more than I could have dreamed of. I'm very grateful." His books have been well received, and he is thrilled to be in a position now where he can help other writers, doing roundups for *Cosmo* (he's currently an editor-at-large) and discussing books on the *Today* show. "I love being able to champion books, being a part of their success—it's wonderful. I just want to continue to write and tell a good story."